

Lithuania Debates Gorbachev Demand

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MOSCOW, May 19 — The Lithuanian Parliament began today to debate how far the republic was willing to retreat from its declaration of independence in an attempt to coax the Kremlin to discuss the issue.

At the close of today's session, the legislators were apparently convinced that some moratorium was unavoidable. But they remained divided over whether they should suspend only the legislation they had adopted since declaring their independence on March 11, or whether they should abide by President Mikhail S. Gorbachev's wishes and freeze the declaration itself.

Unable to achieve a quick consensus, the legislators will meet again on Monday to continue the debate.

People who attended today's parliamentary session said that while there was considerable resistance to the idea of touching the declaration, the debate seemed to center on whether they could trust Mr. Gorbachev to respect the republic's sovereignty if they froze but did not revoke the declaration.

Meeting With Gorbachev

The Lithuanian Prime Minister, Kazimiera Prunskiene, briefed legislators on her meeting in Moscow this week with Mr. Gorbachev, who insisted that the republic must suspend its declaration as a condition for negotiations.

"We must discuss the question about whether we can, in general, retreat from the basic act, the act of re-establishing the independent Lithuanian state," Mrs. Prunskiene told the legislators, according to a report by the official Tass news agency.

Mrs. Prunskiene also discussed her meeting on Friday with Secretary of State James A. Baker 3d, who emphasized American support for Lithuanian independence while trying to prod the

Lithuanians to find a compromise agreeable to Moscow.

Mrs. Prunskiene said there appeared to be a fundamental difference between the way Mr. Gorbachev interpreted suspending the declaration, and the way Mr. Baker did. Mr. Gorbachev, she said, seems to see such an act as returning to the Soviet Constitution, but Mr. Baker said the declaration would be frozen, but still valid.

Baker Explains Position

Lithuanian and State Department officials indicated on Friday that the Secretary of State had encouraged Mrs. Prunskiene to find a diplomatic way to satisfy Mr. Gorbachev's demand, saying suspension of the declaration was not tantamount to repealing it.

At a news conference here today, Mr. Baker said that while he did not press the Lithuanians on the issue of sus-

Some suspension of independence is seen in Vilnius.

pending their declaration, he did emphasize that "only through dialogue" was the republic going to achieve their hopes and aspirations for independence.

Mr. Baker indicated that he regarded the act of suspending the declaration and the laws to be a question of tactics, not principle. He said that "notwithstanding whatever they decide with respect to the tactics of suspension" of the declaration or the laws since passed, Lithuania "would continue to have the support of the United States of America."

A spokeswoman for the Lithuanian Parliament said today that many legis-

lators worried that suspending the declaration would be viewed by the Kremlin as a return to the Soviet Constitution.

"They said that this would be worse than being occupied by the Soviet Union because we could be seen as willingly agreeing to Soviet authority," the spokeswoman, Rita Dopkus, said.

Premier Is Conciliatory

Although Mrs. Prunskiene did not encourage legislators to suspend the declaration, she tried to convey a conciliatory attitude toward Moscow, addressing some of the other concerns raised by the Soviet leadership.

According to Tass, Mrs. Prunskiene said that she would be willing to meet with representatives of the Communist Party faction loyal to Moscow in an effort to ease tensions, because, she said, "Moscow wants this."

For the first time since the political logjam over Lithuania's declaration of independence began, both sides this week seemed to feel pressure for compromise from the visit by Mr. Baker.

The Lithuanians offered the first concession when Parliament agreed on Wednesday to suspend the laws passed since independence was declared — in particular those abolishing the Soviet draft, laying claim to Soviet property and limiting who could become a Lithuanian citizen — while leaving the declaration itself in place.

Taking advantage of Mr. Baker's presence, Mrs. Prunskiene flew to Moscow bearing the proposal.

Gorbachev Agreed to Meeting

Mr. Gorbachev then agreed to meet with Mrs. Prunskiene, despite previously saying he would not speak with Lithuanian officials until they succumbed to Soviet authority. But he insisted that talks on Lithuania's future relationship with the Soviet Union could not begin until the declaration of independence was suspended.

Mrs. Prunskiene said Mr. Gorbachev also warned that sanctions against the republic could be broadened if his conditions were not met.

Even if the Lithuanian and Soviet leadership agree on a formula for suspending or freezing the Lithuanian declaration and laws, there are great hurdles that remain in the negotiations that Mr. Gorbachev promised would follow.

The biggest difference is over the means by which the republic can gain its independence. Mr. Gorbachev has insisted that any republic wishing to leave the union must follow the new law on secession recently passed by the Soviet Parliament. The procedures, which make it very difficult and some say virtually impossible to break away, include approval by two-thirds of the republic of the bid for independence, a five-year transition period and final approval by the Soviet Congress.

Former Independence Cited

Lithuania and its Baltic neighbors, Estonia and Latvia, say they should not be bound by the new law since they were all independent countries illegally annexed by Stalin in 1940 under the terms of a secret treaty with Nazi Germany.

All three republics insist that they are now re-establishing the independence illegally stolen from them then.

Latvia and Estonia have chosen more measured approaches to independence. Both have announced the beginning of an undefined transition period to independence. But Estonia has suspended the Soviet Constitution during this period, while Latvia has stated that the Soviet Constitution and laws basically remain in force until full independence is realized.

Both gradual plans, however, were rejected by Mr. Gorbachev as being unconstitutional, although he did not threaten any punitive sanctions.